INVITE EVERYONE
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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 106:1–5
Luke 14:1, 15–24

"Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled."
Luke 14:23 (NRSV)

The only power that can effect transformations of the order we have described is love.
It remained for the twentieth century to discover that locked within the atom
is the energy of the sun itself. For this energy to be released, however, the atom must be bombarded from without.
So, too, locked in every human being
is a store of love that partakes of the divine—
the *imago dei,* the image of God that is within us.
And it too can be activated only through bombardment—
in its case, love's bombardment.

Huston Smith
The Soul of Christianity:
Restoring the Great Tradition

My family, the Buchanans and the McCormicks, Methodists and Presbyterians, agreed on one thing: Catholics were in a lot of trouble with God. Aunts on both sides became apoplectic and predicted dire and tragic consequences when one of the younger generation stepped out of line and dated a Catholic. Who knows where that might lead? And so I chuckled when I read Sister Joan Chittister's account of the same story, told from the other side.

She writes:

> I was an Irish Catholic child of a Roman Catholic mother and a Presbyterian stepfather. A "mixed marriage" they called it. What they meant was that we were right and he was wrong. We had the truth and he did not. We would go to heaven. He? Well, heaven for him, for them—for Protestants—was at best uncertain. Sad, I knew, but true,

> nevertheless. Except, that deep down inside me, even then, the justice of that statement went begging. (*Called to Question,* pp. 11–12)

The problem, she says, is that her stepfather was a good man: honest, hardworking, had even won a Bible for perfect Sunday school attendance. "What kind of God," she found herself asking, "would burn the good because they belonged to the wrong church?"

"God save us from the smallness we practice in the name of religion," she concludes.

We have come a long way in Protestant-Catholic relationships in our time. But deeper, and more critical, the interfaith question, the matter of how religions relate to one another, how religion influences culture and politics —particularly at this moment in our nation's history—and how religion shapes and forms international, geopolitical relationships is as about as critical as it gets.

Jonathan Sacks, Great Britain's Chief Rabbi, in his fine book *The Dignity of Difference*, observes that the "rising crescendo of ethnic tension, civilization clashes, and the use of religion to justify acts of terror, constitute a clear and present danger to humanity" (p. vii). "What is it about religion that leads people to shed blood in the name of God?" he asks? (pp. 45–50).

The reality is that religion has grown out of and played into a basic human need—for identity. I caught up with a friend last week who has moved to a congregation in the South. Members of her church ask her a question she never heard before: "Who are your people?" Religion is a way to define who my people are and who we are not. Protestants, not Catholics; Presbyterians, not Baptists; Christians, not Jews: designations and definitions that in some places in the world— Northern Ireland, Israel/Palestine, Sudan—can mean life or death. Religion also addresses an even deeper human need to be right, to know the truth, to be the chosen, the elect, the saved.

There are exceptions. Among the loveliest and most eloquent is an idea that comes from the prophets of Israel. Isaiah articulated it:

> On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
> a feast of rich food . . ." (Isaiah 25:6)

God's banquet is for all people, not just chosen people, not just Israel. As a counterpoint to the theme of chosenness, special identity, there is in our oldest scripture an idea that transcends barriers of nation, race, ethnicity,

and religion, the idea that God creates, loves, sustains, and invites into the kingdom all, everybody.

Engraved in the very wall of Congregation Sinai's wonderful new building two blocks from here is the broad vision and these beautiful words: "My house shall be a house of prayer for all people."

Not just Jewish people. Not just Judeo-Christian people. All people.

Another lovely exception to the tendency of religion to narrow, erect barriers, identify those who are in and those who are not, was the early Christian church apparently. Historians tell us that the earliest church was radically egalitarian. It was a phenomenon no one had ever seen before. All were welcome: women were treated equally, so were children. It was breathtaking. Nowhere were women afforded equality with men. In that culture, children were nonentities; in Roman culture, altogether disposable. If you didn't want a child, you simply abandoned him or her on the street. Slaves were welcome, as were people of different color and races. And the practice that was most dramatic and scandalous is that this motley, diverse, radically egalitarian community sat down around a common table and actually ate together.

Of course, it didn't last. As soon as Christianity became legal and then the religion of the empire, it started to look and act like a religion, and it wasn't long until women were excluded again, and the church returned to the safety of complete patriarchy with women on the outside, looking in, a status in which much of Christianity is still stuck. Theological and legal barriers were put in place to define insiders and outsiders. But deep in its heart, Christianity bore the haunting memory and vision of that banquet table where everyone is welcome and where all eat and drink together. Deep in its heart, Christianity remembers a story Jesus told once.

He was a dinner guest in the home of a prominent man in the community. As the meal begins, one of the other guests proposes a toast. It's a little self-congratulatory actually: "Here's to the eating together in kingdom of God!" Translate that: "Here's to us!"

Jesus' response is to tell them a story. A man planned a dinner party, like the one they were enjoying. He sent invitations, made arrangements, had the food prepared. Then, as was the custom, he sent word back to his guests: "The meal is ready. Come now."

A curious thing happened. The guests who had already accepted started to drop out. That was simply not done. In that culture, it was regarded as an act of disrespect and hostility. Besides, in Jesus' story, the excuses that were offered are ridiculous. So the host was appropriately offended. His

response was interesting: Get more guests. In fact, invite the people who never get invited to a dinner like this—the poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame, the very ones religion and social custom marginalize and exclude. When that was done, there were still a few empty seats, so the host sent his servants back out into the city streets: “Compel them to come in”—literally, take them by the arm and guide them to their place at the table—“so that my house may be filled.”

Isn’t that a different picture of heaven? Isn’t that a radical vision of God’s kingdom on earth? Isn’t that a challenging notion of what God’s people ought to be about? And finally, isn’t that about as good as the news can get? There’s a place for everyone!

It was a very different picture from that prominent dinner table at which Jesus was sitting. Who wasn’t there? Who was excluded? Women. Children. The lame and crippled. The less than perfect physically and intellectually. The handicapped and challenged. There were no poor people at that table (everyone knew that poor people were poor as a result of God’s judgment). Sinners weren’t there, the people who lived outside the religious law and conventions. Poor people were also sinners, not because they were bad people, but because they were so busy trying to find food to eat they had no time for the niceties of religious practices, rituals, and ceremonies. And so they were called sinners. And, of course, no one of another race, ethnicity, or religion was at the table that day.

My guess is that the host and other guests smiled politely as they listened to that story and seethed internally and could not wait until it was over to vow that that was the last time Jesus would be invited and, come to think of it, who needs a rabble-rouser like that, an enemy of all that is important and precious to us?

A religious vision with no barriers? A social vision with a place at the table for everyone irrespective of gender, race, physical capacity? Would he not want us to add to that list the barriers religion persists in erecting in our day and those whom religion persists in excluding on the basis of theological and religious choice, sexual orientation, and, of course, the sinners? What would religion ever do without the sinners?

Jesus’ story was a radical critique of the way religious people thought in his day—and in our own.

Then—and now—the poor were not at the table. Who will ever forget the pictures of the poor, mostly black refugees in New Orleans begging for help for days in the Superdome and convention center where they ended up because they did not have the means to leave town and were abandoned? I don’t think that happened for overtly racial reasons. But it did happen

because the poor aren't at the table, not on the radar screen. What more eloquent evidence than Michael Brown, head of the Federal Energy Management Agency, expressing his sympathy but saying that it wasn't the government's responsibility. Churches and charitable organizations should do more, he said.

Martin Marty remembers a convention of historians where one of the presentations was on Protestant clergy in the South prior to 1861: "They were moral, devout, learned, caring, and generous preachers. And to a man they defended slavery, claiming that it was biblically mandated and the will of God." "How could they have been so blind?" the historians asked, until a wise one among them suggested that each write on a piece of paper, "What would make people a century from now ask of us, 'How could they have been so blind?'"

The historians were unanimous: for us it's poverty and the poor. In the midst of this land of plenty, we tolerate tax breaks for the rich and reductions in services for the poor or, here in Illinois specifically, the appalling discrepancy in what we spend to educate the children of privilege and the children of poverty.

There is an important new book out on poverty by Jeffery Sachs, Columbia professor and advisor to UN Secretary General Kofi Anan: *The End of Poverty*. It is being applauded by both liberals and conservatives for its management approach to extreme poverty: the one billion people who live on one dollar or less per day. Sachs's remedy is to invest in five development interventions that would lift the one billion in extreme poverty to moderate poverty, one to two dollars per day, where, Sachs says, there is the beginning of recovery and hope—initiatives such as fertilizers and seeds, health care, schools, clean water.

The cost is modest: 31 cents per day to the poorest of the poor. And then this astonishing statistic: 0.6 percent of the income of the rich world would do it. Not 6 percent, but six-tenths of one percent. Our share, the United States, the richest of the rich, Sachs calculates, could be paid for simply by repealing tax cuts for people who make more than $500,000 per year.

I'm also concerned that in the current religious climate, the table is becoming smaller and smaller theologically. Neo-evangelicals want to keep the guest list limited to those who can agree and subscribe to an ever narrower set of theological formulas. Friends on the right ask me, "We have to have boundaries, don't we?" And I answer, "I guess so," but I am haunted by the story of Jesus, I confess, which seems far more concerned about inviting everyone than it is about setting boundaries and excluding anyone. In those same conversations, that word *inclusivity* is sometimes held up for ridicule—too liberal, too easy. And I keep thinking about that gorgeous

biblical vision of a banquet of rich food for *all* people, not just the theologically orthodox, the morally conventional, the ethnically chosen.

There is no more important challenge before people of faith today than this: can we make space for the other? In a radically globalized world, can we welcome to the table people who believe differently than we do? In the name of the God who wants everyone at the table, can we let go of the idea that our truth is the only truth and until you renounce your truth and convert to mine, you'll have to wait outside? It is a rigorous and difficult challenge. We'd rather not go there. But I believe God calls us to that old vision of a table for all people, where you and I are not in charge of the guest list. God is. Our responsibility is to practice good table manners.

The church of Jesus Christ can be and often is narrow, tribal, exclusive, and sometimes mean. But frequently enough to keep me inside and committed, it demonstrates a hint of God's heavenly, inclusive banquet table and the radical love of Jesus Christ.

A friend was waiting for me at our reception desk at noon a few weeks ago. She watched in amazement as a long line of men and women formed in the lobby and up the steps and down the hall to receive food; and as older adults, some with walkers, some in wheelchairs, made their way to the elevator; and as young parents with babies in strollers arrived for afternoon day care; and as the men and women who attend noon AA meetings came through the door. When I appeared, the first thing she said was "Wow! I had no idea. I wish everyone could see this!"

It is, finally, a matter of grace. The truth of the story Jesus told is that none of us deserves to be at that table. Oh, we'd like to think that we've earned our way, that our good works, our religious practice, our theological orthodoxy, and our moral lifestyle have qualified us. And we're not always comfortable with the notion of grace—that all are welcome, that everyone is invited. But every now and then the truth breaks through. In the dark night of the soul, in moments of quiet honesty, each of us knows our own failures, our limits, our genteel hypocrisies, our practiced certainties, and we know that amazing grace that reaches out in love to each of us, that takes us by the arm, you and me, and leads us to a place we do not deserve to be, a seat at God's banquet.

According to our Lord Jesus, the only qualification for being there, the only qualification, is hunger.

God's house is a house of prayer for all people.
The banquet of rich food is for all.
There will be all kinds of people in the
kingdom we did not expect to be there

—even you, even me.

A Harvard medical student doing research on birth anomalies and how they are communicated to new parents and how they affect the lives of the individuals was visiting the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. The curator showed him an obscure fifteenth-century painting of Madonna and Child, one of literally thousands of that genre. What was interesting about this painting was that the child, baby Jesus, had the features of Down syndrome. The medical student, Brian Sotko, who has a sister who looks like that, said he thought "the artist was someone like me, living in the fifteenth century, who had a brother or sister with Down syndrome and chose to use the child as a model"—for Jesus (*The Wall Street Journal*, 3 October 2005, p.1). The artist may not have been one of the world's greatest painters, but he knew the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We all come, whoever we are, just as we are, to the table, where there is a place for everyone.

Newly Baptized Babies—Old—Young
Physically, Intellectually Challenged
Black—White
Rich—Poor
Gay—Straight
Conservative—Liberal
Republican—Democrat
Catholic—Protestant
Believer—Not Sure What I Believe
Devout—Doubter—Merely Curious
Haunted by God
You—Me

"Go out into the roads and compel people to come in so that my house may be filled."

Thanks be to God.

Amen.